

New words rising

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REVIEW: A T Qabula, M S Hlatshwayo and N Malange, Black mamba rising: South African worker poets in struggle, Worker Resistance and Culture Publications, c/o Department of Industrial Sociology, University of Natal, King George V Ave., Durban 4001; or from COSATU Workers' Cultural Local, P O Box 18109, Dalbridge 4014; R3.50 for workers, R6.00 standard.

In 1985 the South African Labour Bulletin carried an interview with several members of the Durban FOSATU Cultural Group (now called the Durban Worker's Cultural Local), in which this group outlined the purpose and scope of their cultural work. They see that their cultural work, mainly to do with poetry and plays, is "not just entertainment, it is a weapon". They see culture in the trade unions as a powerful tool for educating people, creating a sense of unity and enriching political struggles. It should put "across a true picture of things - our picture".

They emphasize that the fight for a working class culture is not just a way to help remove the present wave of repression in South Africa, but that it should also direct itself with questions of how to build a new world of justice, freedom and an end to worker exploitation by capitalists and the middle classes. They see their work as a model which may inspire other workers to start creating culture for themselves. Their work can begin breaking down the barriers that exist between different groups of workers, between workers and their families, and between workplace and community. (1)

Black Mamba Rising contains poems by Alfred Temba Qabula, Mi S'Dumo Hlatshwayo and Nise Malange, all of which they first performed in 1984 and 1985. All three were present at the interview described above. All three are union members (the two men of MAWU and Malange of TGWU), and all three have been involved at a shop steward or organiser level. They come from slightly different backgrounds. Qabula hails from the Transkei and has worked as a migrant in the cities of the Transvaal and Natal for over twenty years; Hlatshwayo is the child of a poor urban working class upbringing in the Durban area; and Malange, in the words of the introduction, is "the wander-

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ing youth of the 1976 generation", shuttling between Cape Town, the Ciskei and Natal in her youth. All three were central to the creation of the Durban Worker's Cultural Local in 1985, and at the end of the same year were part of the development of a Trade Union & Cultural Centre in Clairwood alongside the area's shop-steward council. They have taken part in the revival of oral poetry in trade union circles, and perform regularly at trade union functions, meetings and other events of political importance. This and the fact that they - with the exception of Malange - compose their poems in Zulu and Xhosa first and later translate them into English has made their work popular with a large audience of people who have difficulty with literacy and European languages.

Transforming tradition

Thus, at least some of the poetry in this book can best be seen as both a revival and a transformation of traditional izibongo, or praise poetry. Praise poetry in South Africa is usually thought of as related to traditional and ethnic power (Matanzima and Inkatha, for instance, have their own praise poets, as has the Zulu king): but here it is used by those who are challenging established power. It is yet another example of how izibongo can be transformed by political changes and history. Three previous instances immediately spring to mind: the Mfecane brought about a change in the form and length of praise poetry at the beginning of the 19th century; by the end of the century those chiefs who collaborated with colonialism were being almost openly and ironically criticised by their poets; and praise poetry has more recently been used as a weapon for political criticism and propaganda during the disagreement between chiefs over the question of Transkei's independence in the early 1960's. (2) Even in the Durban area this is not the first time izibongo have been used in trade union matters: in 1930 a traditional imbongi, Hlongwe, was active praising Champion and the ICU. (3)

The poetry in Black mamba rising resembles praise poetry to some extent in both manner of delivery and style (devices such as exhortation, repetition, various forms of linguistic parallelism as well as political commentary couched in allusions and symbolism can be found, in particular in Qabula and Hlatshwayo). The introduction therefore warns us that "the poems printed here in translation and outside their context suffer: they lose much of their oral power; the songs, the chants, the ululations, their improvisatory nature and of course, the popular responses that accompany their oration."

However, the poetry here shows a broader social vision than traditional praise poetry, and uses other devices which are obviously not retrospective. This poetry is, in short, a modern, radically transformed oral poetry. All three poets comment on a world especially meaningful to a black worker audience and readership. Among the subjects dealt with are tributes to unions, union activists and the black working class; evocations of the lives of migrant workers and the unemployed; laments about the demise of traditional Africa; poems about the need for unification; and poems attacking racism and faction fighting. As one commentator puts it, these poets attempt in their poems to build aesthetic, political and moral values which will sustain the workers in their struggle for a better life, using images rooted in popular and traditional symbolism. (4)

In Qabula's "Praise poem to FOSATU", the trade union federation is seen as both a protection and a refuge for workers, a "moving forest of Africa" akin to the forests used as a place of resistance and ambush during past resistance to European conquest. In Qabula's and Hlatshwayo's poem first performed at the launching of COSATU in 1985 ("The tears of a creator"), the new federation is likened to the huge tornado-snake of traditional mythology, Inkhanyamba. Other usages of such symbolism abound; Hlatshwayo describes militant textile workers as "Regiment\Of NUTW once halted\With the spears of retrenchment.\Once stopped\With the spear of the industrial council" ("Sprout further Jabulani Gwala") and the Frame management as "The trickster\The red cobra\The devourer of households" ("A salute for Samson Cele").

Working lives

These images of traditional and rural origin are counterbalanced by Christian and modern symbols. Thus, to Qabula, FOSATU is "our Moses" and "the metal locomotive that moves on top\of other metals\The metal that doesn't bend that was sent to the\Engineers but they couldn't bend it" ("Praise poem to FOSATU"). Hlatshwayo bemoans the fate of Africa under the lash of colonialism and capitalism in "Worker's lamentation for ancient Africa": "Even water\Gift of the skies\Has been made scarce\to be paid dearly\In Rands and Dollars\In an Africa\Of long and meandering\Rivers..." These poems do not simply praise the past. A powerful sense of irony, of contradiction, of the disappointments and dislocations workers face emerges. The workers' fight does not always succeed; Hlatshwayo describes it as "Dying and resurrecting like\A dangabane flower" ("The black mamba

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rises"). And, while some poems name and praise heroes of history and contemporary resistance, the leaders do not always perform what they promise ("Time and again we have been electing leaders.\ Electing people with whom we were born and grew\Up together.\People who knew all our sufferings,\Together with whom we were enslaved.\ on the\Top of the mountain,\And they turned against us" (Qabula, "Praise poem to FOSATU"). An apocalyptic tone is present too, especially in the work of Hlatshwayo, who makes various references to the day of the "new Jerusalem" which will end social exploitation.

A great deal of this poetry gives us a viewpoint up until now little represented in anthologies of South African poetry, and exhibits much technical skill. Some of these poems are excellent by anybody's standards. In "I, the unemployed", Malange gives an evocative and powerful insight into the consciousness of the growing number of unemployed and poverty-stricken people in South Africa, those who are dumped to manage as best they can ("I spit at the sun\Shining on me\Blazing everyday\I am waiting for the rain to come\And I cannot plough this beautiful piece of earth.\Here I am: unemployed\...I am here but invisible"). And the tone is not only sombre and stirring. In "Praise poem to FOSATU", Qabula hilariously depicts a conversation in fanakalo between a manager and an impimpi during a strike ("Baas, Baas, thina bukile lomvukuzane buya losayidi\Kalofekthri kathina." "Yah, yah; What is the mvukuzane, my boy, tell me,\What is it?\Is it one of FOSATU's unions?\You are a good muntu\Mina bhilda wena 6 room house\Lapha lohomeland kawena.\Thatha lo-machine gun, vala logates\Skathi wena buka lo-union\Bulala lo-union...").

Worker poets and popular culture

The poems in Black Mamba Rising exhibit clearly the way in which layers of class, ethnic, religious, nationalist and sexual identities are enmeshed in the minds of both these poets and the wider audience of black workers: indeed, the very title 'black mamba' (meant as a descriptive metaphor for the black working class) has subconscious masculine connotations. In some poems I got the feeling that "the nation" was used as the basic building block of consciousness: in Usuku, Hlatshwayo's play performed elsewhere, the main character speaks of the black working class as "my people, we workers of Africa, our nation" (5). Culturally, the consciousness of any individual South African worker will of course be filled with ways of identifying himself or herself which are not specifically those of class. The point is whether or not (and to what extent)

one's class consciousness is mixed with and transforms the other modes of identity present. These poets are obviously aware of the need to contest these identities, and not just leave them to go by default to middle class or populist organisations to tap their emotional appeal in a vague way.

Yet the fact is that populist and nationalist movements - whether reactionary or progressive - are strongest ideologically on the terrain of popular and traditional symbols. The general movement of the democratic unions towards wider community politics has great possibilities: but how, then, are unions to play a role in this ideological sphere without having their voice drowned, or simply seen as one among many cultural voices which go to make up the national culture? For the goal for working class activists in the unions, surely, is not just to include working class heroes in a pantheon of black nationalist heroes, or just to use slogans like 'Heyta Comrade Barayi, Heyta Comrade Mayekiso' so that workers can know their leaders and praise them (6). Cultural workers in the unions need, to my mind, to build slogans and enact stories around the need for democratic socialism and for a future in which working people play a politically dominant role as well. It is not enough to speak vaguely of a "calculated involvement" in wider arenas of political and cultural struggle as one COSATU official has done. (7) The question is: how is it to be done? How is it more exactly to be done? While there is a need for flexibility in these matters, a completely ad hoc approach is surely not enough. It is true that in Black mamba rising the poets are changing traditional and popular symbols in a way which will benefit the working class, as working audiences hear "the form (of)...the lay-preachers of the poor people's churches done by an ordinary worker...the brotherly context without hierarchies and chiefs - the shop steward led strike." (8) Yet still one is left with an uneasy feeling that too much faith can be placed in the transformative power of traditional symbols alone. They have their own historical weight and resonance, and activists should be aware that there can at best be limited control over how an audience accepts them. On paper, there is an ambiguity present in such symbols and images which can lead to widely differing interpretations of their usefulness and effect.

Qabula, Hlatshwayo and Malange are aware of these problems, as their book shows. They speak constantly about the future as well as the past, and about the need for a new era of social peace and justice to come. This differentiates their poetry markedly from the Inkatha poet CDS Mbutho's poem "Sikhuleka kuwe Silo SikaNdaba",

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which seeks only to legitimize Buthelezi in terms of Zulu heroes of the past and a narrowly conceived ethnic nationalism. They are furthermore aware of the problems of class difference in black society. When asked in 1985 to what extent their work had a specifically working class bias, and to what extent it drew on wider traditions of resistance and protest, they said: (9)

There are very strong cultural traditions... at the same time there is no one tradition, there are many. Of course it has many political elements from the past. But it also has many new ones. Where it gets its character is quite simple: it starts from our experience and our unity. So it has to draw a line against any exploiter in the factory or the townships; against impimpis; against white and black politicians who betray us; against divisions. It also differs from a lot of black creators who have a patronising attitude to us: a lot of people with a ticky's worth of education have a superior attitude towards us.'

The notion of a culture of resistance is strong in this book. This can best be seen in who these poets castigate most often in the poems: black and white managers, white politicians and capitalists, racists, impimpis and so on. For instance, in "Today" (meant to be performed at the FOSATU Education Workshop in June 1985) Malange evokes the presence of all those who have died in the political struggle in South Africa's history. In contrast to heroes such as Biko, Aggett and Raditsela, who are "holding our hands\...Moving through all our bodies\Like a bloodstream", the traitors present weep and "cannot hold our hands" and those who were uncommitted during their lifetimes "now want to put their arms around us and sing: Hlanganani Basebenzi". In a poem of vision and apocalypse akin to Hlatshwayo, Malange here shows a desire for unity from which those who have wilfully gone against the struggle for freedom will be excluded. Here the divisions are clearcut, with those who resist oppression on one side and those who cause it on the other.

It is in the earlier poems of this volume that the poets most obviously demonstrate a more specifically working class consciousness ("Praise poem to FOSATU", "The black mamba rises", "Migrants Lament", "The tears of a creator"). The later shift in 1985 possibly reflects the movement of union activists into community issues. While the taking up of wider community issues is totally necessary, the terms of such involvement need to be re-examined all the time. It is far too easy to let a militant nationalism - at this time present in black workers as well as other classes -

overcome the unique demands of the working class. At worst, the class specificities in some of these poems begin to slip away: and it is interesting to note that it is the migrant worker, Qabula, who seems to avoid this tendency. While Black mamba rising is not really culpable to any extent in this regard, there is a sense in some trade union utterances at the present that the black petty bourgeoisie is supposed to be on the workers' side because they are black: one can point out that in many other African countries this trust and faith has been betrayed since independence. For instance, the SWAPO poet Mvula ya Nangolo describes the exploitation by the black middle class in Lagos at the present time as follows: "From airconditioned automobiles\into servant-slave infested palaces\They clap hands or press imported little buttons\attached to wires and then;\Half a dozen servants-slaves appear in uniform\to serve, to swallow indignity, degradation, etc.\merely to receive a meagre salary\when the new moon is sighted."

Political diversity and self-criticism

Any large scale spread of culture in this country to those less privileged classes so long denied a voice will probably result in an increasing plethora of cultural forms and a range of political opinions coming to light, which would make any simple slotting of people into "progressive" and "reactionary" categories more difficult to uphold. Symbols of unity as presented in this volume would constantly need to be tested against an awareness of cultural and social differences and desire for democratic discussion. Inkatha poses this problem in an immediate way for progressive trade unions. It makes promises of liberation to black people, it uses similar forms of traditional culture, it has strong roots in ethnic identity, it even has an official praise poet. Some of its members are also members of progressive trade unions, and will possibly be puzzled by the virulent distinction cultural workers make between Inkatha\ UWUSA and the democratic trade union movement, at least in terms of the culture propagated. There is obviously a crucial area of cultural struggle emerging here, but how is it best approached?

Issues of criticism and class dynamics are perhaps easier approached through the medium of worker plays: the emotional and declamatory nature of praise poetry makes it a difficult form to use for such ends. And it must be said that these poets can only be partially criticised with regard to these issues: they do not readily fall into the traps of sloganising and ignoring social differences in the manner, say, of black consciousness writers in the 1970's.

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Furthermore, they themselves have pointed out that critical debate and a questioning attitude serve to strengthen unity in the long run and make any leadership more accountable to its members.

If one of the roles of trade union cultural activists is to educate and conscientise, then they must also play a critical role in pointing out problems and ask questions. Alongside the tasks of politicisation and unification, self-criticism and open debate are necessary priorities. Alongside the other educational organs of the trade union movement, such as literacy and higher educational classes, creative writing can perhaps serve to instill readers and audience with a sense of history, with the tools to forge their own opinions about political and other events, and with some knowledge of the problems that beset not only capitalist countries, but those countries which call themselves socialist too.

The poems' representation of figures and events from South African history is also powerful and to the point. Yet in one instance Qabula and Hlatshwayo let the use of traditional symbolism and emotional explanation overcome their critical consciousness. In "The tears of a creator", they say "COSATU\Stop now\Listen to our sound\You'll hear us sing\That the rulers\And employers\Are sorcerers!\Do not smile\Do not dare disagree\If that was devoid of truth\Where is the ICU of the 1920's to be found?\Where is the FNETU of the 30's to be found?\Where is the CNETU of the 40's to be found?\And the others?\They emerged\They were poisoned\Then\They faded!". Surely "sorcery" is not an adequate explanation for the failure of these unions? Neither is it a helpful way of informing workers what the problems were: which is the only way such problems can be avoided in the future. An adequate explanation of the failure of the ICU, for example, would need to look at many issues such as state repression, the depression, corruption among union officials and a vacillating leadership who were inclined to make grandiose promises to the workers which they did not carry out.

Spreading the message

This book is well worth reading and pondering on. For those who are interested, it also contains the Durban group's talk for the 1985 FOSATU Education Workshop, which was never delivered. As Hlatshwayo has pointed out in another context, Black mamba rising shows that "I with other millions of the working class are beginning to write, to organise and to learn - about ourselves, about our power, about others, and about our land". (10) What is

especially heartening about the cultural activity coming from trade union members at the moment is that it provides a way for many people to express themselves. The fact that this process is beginning is in no small way due to the energy and commitment of cultural workers such as Qabula, Hlatshwayo and Malange.

Black mamba rising is an important and exciting book. One can hope that in future others will follow this example, hone their skills and express their experiences, insights and desires in performance and on paper: for it is necessary for workers not only to use oral but also written means of communication in South Africa today. Literacy, education and writing skills are also crucial if workers are to gain access to political and social power in the country. As Qabula observes, "People must write. They must take out their pens and paper and write. It doesn't matter if it is good or bad - the voice of the workers must be heard." (11)

References

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